DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 943 JC 030 582

AUTHOR	Moore, Jonelle; Dille, Brian J.
TITLE	To Inform Their Discretion: Designing an Integrated Learning Community Focusing on Civic Engagement.
INSTITUTION	Mesa Community Coll., AZ.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	9p.; In: Journal for Civic Commitment, Volume 1, Number 2, 2003.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.mc.maricopa.edu/other/engagement/Journal/Issue1/MooreDille.jsp.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Community Action; *Community Colleges; Community Responsibility; *Community Services; Research; *Research Problems; Research Projects; Research Reports; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	*Mesa Community College AZ

ABSTRACT

This document is about a learning community created by two Mesa Community College faculty members. Their initial goal for creating the center was to improve student learning, deepen the relationship between faculty and students, etc. The program has a service-learning requirement that was implemented with the goal of preparing students to become informed and active citizens within their communities. Each student is required to complete twenty hours of community service which is meant to provide students with insight unavailable from mediated sources and to allow students to learn practical knowledge. Students must also create and write a research project that requires them to gather data using resources such as the internet and the library. By combining their research and their community service project, the students gain insight into their community and about their own goals. Many students leaving the course have chosen to incorporate what they have learned into their plans for their personal futures. The authors conclude that the success of the program came as no surprise. They met their initial goal of teaching students the importance of civic duty through research and service learning and had a rewarding teaching experience in the process. (MZ)

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To Inform Their Discretion: Designing an Integrated Learning Community Focusing on Civic Engagement

Jonelle Moore
Brian J. Dille

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To Inform Their Discretion: Designing an Integrated Learning Community Focusing on Civic Engagement

Jonelle Moore, English Faculty, Mesa Community College
Brian J. Dille, Ph.D, Political Science Faculty, Mesa Community College

I know of no safe repository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

Thomas Jefferson, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (1903)[1]

The potential for deeper student learning was the impetus for creating our learning community, as it is with any new methodology. Other goals included clearer connections between disciplines, closer connections between students and faculty, and opportunities for academic and social interaction, to name a few (Matthews, Smith, MacGregor, Gabelnick, 1996). In our case, we were seeking pragmatic solutions to instructional challenges that interfered with student learning. We chose a civic engagement focus because of an underlying belief that a central purpose for higher education is to prepare students for active participation in our government and our communities. Therefore, we combined governmental studies with research and writing instruction and a required service-learning component to offer practical social and civic experiences.

First Year Composition – Research Paper Writing (ENG102) is a gateway course. With few exceptions, students are required to successfully complete the course to earn their associates degree and later their baccalaureate degree; even some certification programs require composition courses at the Maricopa Community Colleges. Although the curriculum is relatively straightforward, the class lacks substantial content –

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appropriate research topics. Different approaches ranged from literary topics to current issues. However, when attempting to center on public issues, it became readily apparent that the students had no sense of the political context for their findings.

The instructional challenge for American Government (POS110) was that coverage of the material while employing active learning methodologies precludes necessary writing instruction. While struggling to keep disengaged students interested in the subject matter, the course assignments require research and essay writing. Linking these classes addresses effective student learning while offering an opportunity for improved instructional strategies. The courses are taught as a two-hour block using an integrated syllabus – common assignments that are often team-taught. Shared assignments are a book review and a final research project, which is displayed in a public poster session and orally defended before the class.

Built into our learning community is our desire to teach our curricula while encouraging our students to understand and engage in a governing system that, according to Mario Cuomo, "rewards those who participate and punishes those who don't" (Vote for Me, 1995). We wanted to give our students a reason to engage in public life by "informing their discretion by education" in compliance with the view of Thomas Jefferson.

Yet, it is not enough to simply increase student awareness of political issues, or even to engage them in research on those issues. Both of us had previously experimented with community research in our separate courses. In their action plans prior to the learning community, the students identified a problem area, summarized the existing policy dealing with that problem, and then proposed a solution to that problem. These

solutions were often unrealistic, antiseptic, or otherwise disinterested academic exercises. At the end of the course students were content to have earned a grade; few had any expressed desire to follow through on their action plans. Students are quick to undertake a research project. Yes, most wait until the deadline to begin. By quick we mean they readily accept the assignment as something expected of them in school. Most have had years of experience writing simple issue papers by the time they reach our courses, and most can do a passable job of issue-summary without a great deal of effort. What is much more difficult for them is committing to engage in action, to leave the passive practice of perusing the library or the Internet and begin an active search for first-hand knowledge or experience.

What was needed for our learning community was a mechanism to translate students' increase in knowledge to engagement in their communities. Service-learning provided this link. Students were required to provide twenty hours of service in an area that would in some way be connected to their problem area. The service-learning component had two direct advantages. First, the students gained insights unavailable from mediated sources; they gained experiential knowledge. In their reflective essays and final presentations, several said that they had started out with one understanding of the problem gained from their research. Once they spent time with those directly affected, however, they discovered that the real problem was something they (or their sources) had overlooked, and they ended with a different understanding of the problem. One such example was a group working on implementation of Arizona's English-only instruction law. Their research suggested that the primary barrier to teachers getting their ESL certification was attitudinal; lazy or angry teachers refusing to abide by the new law.

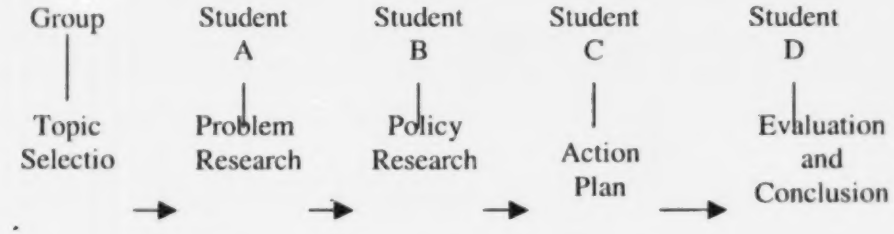
Instead, they discovered that there was little financial incentive and tremendous obstacles to certification, leading them to propose a radically different solution than the one they had begun with.

Second, the service-learning requirement broadened the scope of the student research. The students work in groups on their action plans. Previously, this often meant that one student researched the problem, another the policy, another the solution, and so forth. In the learning community, however, all were required to engage in service. Collaboration often, though not necessarily, meant that the students went to different sites, where each gained a unique perspective on their problem issue. When they later met together to discuss the problem and develop an action plan, the resulting plan reflected a richer, more discerning view than any one person's experience might have otherwise suggested. This then led to much more realistic and meaningful action plans. So successful was this process, that unlike previous semesters, several students left the course with the intention of using their plans as blueprints for personal future action. These advantages are summarized below in Table 1.

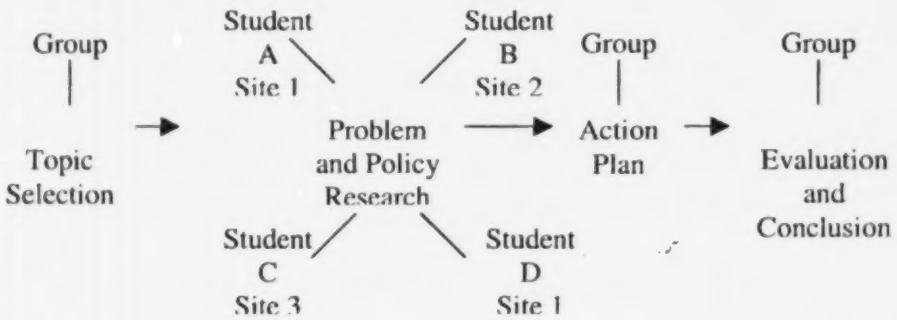
Such success should come as no surprise. Anne Colby and Thomas Ehrlich assure educators in their introduction to *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, 2000, that "research over many decades has shown that, in fact, the undergraduate experience does have a socializing effect on political beliefs and other values, and that outcomes such as a maturity of moral judgment, racial and religious tolerance, and civic and political participation are positively associated with educational attainment" (p. xxviii).

Table 1: Contrast between traditional group research practice and service-learning augmented research

Traditional Model



Service-Learning Augmented Model



As we were beginning our pilot project, Paula Vaughn, an assessment consultant, introduced us to her service learning rubrics (2001). While there are instruments available for assessing service-learning programs, and civic engagement specifically, most do not measure the kinds of outcomes that practitioners are proposing, such as changes in outlook and expectations. Six of Vaughn's thirteen rubrics are intended to assess student growth related, directly and indirectly, to civic engagement. Vaughn has

designed rubrics to measure each of these areas: civic participation, academic growth, ethical growth, social change, personal growth, and career exploration.

Grounded in the current research, Vaughn's rubrics offer a performance-based accountability measure for service learning. In recent years faculty have been asserting that students have acquired deeper learning from their service learning experiences. Performance-based assessment provides an accountability measure for practitioners. As with most real-world tasks, performance tasks do not have a single correct answer; there are various successful answers that could apply. Consequently, students' performance of tasks cannot be *machine scored*, but must be judged by one or more persons using well-defined criteria. Generally, the performance-based rubrics guide the teacher and student through the evaluation process. They quantify and measure specific learning outcomes as opposed to a survey. At this writing, we are reviewing student assignments – journals, research papers and an exit interview using the rubrics. Because we continue to collect and study the data, our assessment remains inconclusive, except for our anecdotal observations.

Initially, our learning community was motivated by our desire to provide students with more effective learning experiences and to engage students as citizens through service learning. After our first year we are convinced that a learning community focused on civic engagement, using service learning and proper assessment tools, is not only an effective methodology, but makes teaching rewarding.

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Title: To Inform Their Discretion: Designing an Integrated Learning Community Focusing on Civic Engagement	
Author(s): Jonelle Moore and Brian J. Ollie	
Corporate Source: The Journal For Civic Commitment Vol 1, No 1	Publication Date: 2003

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Signature: Brian Ollie	Printed Name/Position/Title: Brian Ollie (Faculty
Organization/Address: Mesa Community College / 1833 W. Southern Ave Mesa, AZ 85202	Telephone: 480-461-7065 FAX: 480-461-781
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